

Social Science Bites

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leading social scientists

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In association with



Avner de-Shalit

- David Edmonds: *Some people have strong and visceral reactions to cities. They might love or loathe New York, or Jerusalem, or Berlin. This may have something to do with the architecture and the infrastructure of a place; it may also be a response, at some level, to the people, the culture, the politics, the way of life. Avner de-Shalit has co-authored a book in which he claims that some cities - not all cities but some - have a spirit.*
- Nigel Warburton: Avner de-Shalit welcome to Social Science Bites.
- Avner de-Shalit: Hello.
- Nigel Warburton: The topic we're going to focus on is the spirit of cities. What is it for a city to have a spirit?
- Avner de-Shalit: By a city we mean both a physical thing and a level of relationships between people; so just like a community could be something that you see, that has borders, but it could also be level of relationships, a kind of altruistic relationship between people, so we think the city represents a kind of level of relationship between people plus the physical things: so the neighbourhood, the streets, the monuments.
- Nigel Warburton: But the word 'spirit' sounds like something ethereal occupying the physical thing and that's not quite what you mean is it? It's more like an ethos, a dominant characteristic.
- Avner de-Shalit: Yes, so it is an ethos. It is the dominant or prevalent set of ideas, goals, that people have about the meaning of their life in their cities. So if you believe that your city, the inhabitants, the political institutions of the city, should have a goal or a mission that should be promoted then that's the ethos or the spirit of the city.
- Nigel Warburton: So could you give an example of this?
- Avner de-Shalit: OK, Oxford has a spirit of learning. Jerusalem has a spirit of religion. New York has a spirit of ambition. Amsterdam has a spirit of tolerance and accepting people. Paris has a spirit of romance, something like anti-bourgeois romantic thinking. And so on. Not every city has a spirit. Some cities choose not to have a spirit: they want to be cosmopolitan just like every other place, and some cities fail to have a spirit: you have to have some conditions in order to develop a spirit.
- Nigel Warburton: OK, just before we get on to the cities with spirit, I'd love to hear some which have no spirit.

Avner de-Shalit: This is going to be controversial. I think London doesn't have. London has lots of boroughs or neighborhoods, and each one of them might have a different spirit. But I think London is trying to be as cosmopolitan as it can be. Even this morning, I've been walking in London trying to see whether I could find something, trying to talk to people. I've failed.

Nigel Warburton: So that's really interesting. We can divide the cities of the world into those with and those without spirit. Why would we even want to do that?

Avner de-Shalit: One reason is because it's interesting - so that's the scientific reason: I think it's true and I want to show that it's true. The other one is normative: if it's true this could be some challenges to a state and to nationality. I come from a place where many people are nationalistic and I don't like it, and the state is very strong and I don't like it. I think states are struggling to be meaningful these days but they cannot be because they have to submit themselves to the rules of the market, so to speak, or even to regulations of the IMF, the World Bank: what really matters is the market, globalism. So states are becoming less and less meaningful. I think that people do want to experience this sense of particularity. They do want to feel that there's something unique about their social and political life. So maybe the city can be an alternative in that sense.

Nigel Warburton: OK let's take the example of Oxford. I happen to live there, so I've got a particular take on Oxford. Now you're saying it's a city of learning which is not *that* controversial; but I could equally say it's a city of privilege. How do you decide that it's a city of learning and not a city of privilege?

Avner de-Shalit: OK, one thing I want to say is that it is I think a city of learning but I think the problem with it is that it's not distributed equally. If you go to Blackbird Lees in the south, or the south part of the Cowley Road, you don't sense this. You talk to people who say 'Oh yes, their city is a city of learning; our city is not because we don't have access to it.' But how do we get it? Well, look at the book fairs, look at the number of artists per person, look at the number of novelists per person, the highest in England; probably the highest in Europe and this penetrates so to speak to schools and to high schools. You know, I know a lot of people who moved from London to Oxford because they didn't want to send their kids to private, to independent schools. They wanted them to go to state schools. Where do you have good state schools: in Oxford.

Nigel Warburton: There are some good state schools and there are some bad state schools. There are certainly schools which are failing schools in the Oxford area. To play devil's advocate, I could say you're presenting a

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skewed picture because you're projecting this vision of learning onto the city and, actually, the complexity of the city, is that there's lots of different things: there's learning, there's industry, it's a city of transient populations, it's a city of tourism: it's like honey for tourists.

Avner de-Shalit: But why do tourists come to Oxford? Because of this ethos of learning and scholarship. You know if you compare Oxford to Cambridge for example, Cambridge prides itself on its scientific achievements and on its research, and Oxford the ideal don is just like the teacher in school. He or she is somebody who transfers knowledge from one generation to the other rather than somebody who does a lot of research. They do have wonderful research. I guess the atmosphere is of learning... This means some bad things, like for example the colleges. Look at the way the colleges are structured: they are inward looking. If somebody is a student in a college will step out of their rooms and they'll be in an internal garden or corridors and they don't have to have access to the real city. Whereas like if you're in London, the tourist houses, you step out of the tourist houses and you're outside in the street. That makes a difference in the way people treat the city and social life.

Nigel Warburton: I want to come back to the methodology. Oxford is just one example of many that you've looked at. So what you do, you interview people and you try to understand the essence of a place...

Avner de-Shalit: It's a combination of two things right, one is the interviews and here you have again the combination of prearranged structured interviews, but mostly we just bump into people in the street and nag them and ask them if they want a glass of wine or café and talk to them like half an hour and then we thank them (and promise to send them a book, which we never do - sorry, we should have done this). And we believe that this way of strolling in the city, les flaneurs, (I forget who did this): the stroller was compared to a botanist of the street. You just go and you smell things and look at things and you get the impression. I guess that in the first day you have a lot of mistakes, but then two, three, four days that you've been working like eight hours a day and talking to people you get so many interviews that you gradually have this idea of what the city is all about. And then to this we add these interpretations of architecture and planning. But not only interpretation of monuments but also interpretation of behavior and customs, like for example, take early morning espresso in a café. Okay, in New York, you enter, 'can I help you sir?' and you pay and then you get it. In Paris, no, you have to talk first, you have to have a discussion, then you pay. Why is it? What is the idea of having an early espresso and having a chat with the person who serves you the espresso or with the person who is sitting or standing actually next to you? How does it aim to build a community and build relationships in the city? So we do all

these interpretations of monuments, behaviors, customs, plus all these interviews. What's the point? The point is hopefully to generalize about cities and their role in life.

Nigel Warburton: When you've identified this spirit, what effect does that have hopefully on the people within the city? Does it actually reinforce the spirit, for instance?

Avner de-Shalit: So in a way what we do is a combination of social sciences with normative social sciences. What we want to do at the end is theorize about these values and influences. If you look at the history of political thought it all started with cities: Athens and Sparta, and then it moved to the state. In contemporary political philosophy you have a lot of talks about the state and about global justice or democracy or what have you, and we think that you can pick up ideas and values from the city and this could be an inspiration for a very good discussion of these values, whether they are good or not, whether they make people have or not.

Nigel Warburton: Do you see yourself as a social scientist in what you do?

Avner de-Shalit: People distinguish between hardcore empirical number-crunching social sciences and soft social sciences, which are interpretive. I think this is the softest you can get. It's very close to normative political philosophy. But yes, I think this is part of social sciences because the subject matter which we study is society; we employ some methods which are classical social sciences. Walter Benjamin did this; he wrote a book on Paris using the same method. So yes, I guess, this is the kind of social science which I hope would be accepted by everybody.

Nigel Warburton: When you come to a judgment about a city, about what its essence is, what its ethos is, there will be people who disagree. On what basis is your interpretation justified. What's the underpinning for it?

Avner de-Shalit: It's whether it's intuitive or not, A; but B we do double check. We do look at statistics and figures and try to see whether we're completely wrong or whether it's visible what we're trying to offer. For example, in Oxford I started with this idea that Oxford was a city of class and privilege and I realized that this was an image that was projected on Oxford, and that figures that I had do not support it. So I started looking for something else and I talked to people and then, actually, people convinced me it was about learning.

Nigel Warburton: Can a city have a false consciousness of its own ethos so that it's got a particular view of what kind of a city it is but it's just totally wrong about it?

Avner de-Shalit: Yes, my city, Jerusalem, most of Jerusalem is horrific religion. It's religion that has to do with hatred and enmity and dismissing the

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other, but many people if you talk to them in Jerusalem they think that it's the purest and nicest form of religion that exists. So I guess many people in Jerusalem have a kind of false consciousness.

Nigel Warburton: If your work had the ideal reception, how would it change the world?

Avner de-Shalit: Gosh, what a question. I don't know whether a particular project can change the world. I believe that social science is done by a lot of people who are doing kind of small projects. The big picture is really changing the world. So I hope in my modest way I can contribute to this, to modifying the way power exists in the world and transferring some of the political power from states to the cities.

Nigel Warburton: Avner de-Shalit, thank you very much.

Avner de-Shalit: Thank you.

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